



Public Hearing Information

US-31 Freeway Connection to I-94



Public Hearing October 30, 2002

3:30 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.
and
7:00 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.

Mendel Center on the
Lake Michigan
Community College
Campus

2755 East Napier Avenue
Benton Harbor, MI

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Public Hearing October 30, 2002

This public hearing is your opportunity to voice your opinion regarding the proposed US-31 Freeway Connection to I-94 in Berrien County, Michigan. The public hearing will use an "open forum" style. This informal type of hearing allows the public to stop in anytime during the scheduled hours, gather facts on the study, and talk one to one with Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) Study Team members in the fields of engineering, environmental analysis, traffic, and real estate. A continuous audio-visual presentation, located near the entrance to the public hearing, will help citizens to learn as much as possible about the proposed project and also discuss many of the issues covered in this brochure.

A court reporter will be available to record oral statements. Hearing participants wishing to make a statement or comment about the proposed project may do so at anytime during the hearing. Their comments will appear in the transcript of

this public hearing. Citizens can also fill out a comment form and deposit it into the comment boxes at the public hearing site. Comments can also be mailed, faxed, or e-mailed to the address on the back of this brochure. The public record will be open for receiving comments until November 30, 2002. We urge citizens to let MDOT know their views on the proposed project.

By the middle of December, a copy of the complete transcript including all of the written and oral comments received will be available for public review at the Benton Charter Township Hall, Lake Michigan College's William Hessel Library, the Berrien County Road Commission Office, the Southwestern Michigan Commission Office, MDOT's Coloma Transportation Service Center, and MDOT's Southwest Region Office in Kalamazoo. All comments will be shared with the Study Team including the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

Project Information

Since March 2001, MDOT has been studying alternatives for connecting the US-31 freeway (currently under construction up to Napier Avenue) to I-94. The alignment originally approved in 1981, which would connect US-31 to I-94 at the current I-94/I-196 interchange, would require costly bridge structures over the environmentally sensitive Blue Creek Fen. The MDOT Team has been evaluating alternatives that reduce costs and

environmental impacts. At the last public meeting, November 6, 2001, four Practical Alternatives were presented. These alternatives have been discussed in detail, along with a No-Build Alternative in the Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (DSEIS) prepared for the study. This brochure provides a summary of the DSEIS.

Study Background and Status

The US-31 freeway improvements between the Indiana Toll Road (I-80/90) and the US-31/I-196 connection at I-94 have been ongoing for more than 30 years. Construction of the last 19 mile segment of this freeway was approved in a 1981 Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). Construction of this freeway segment has been ongoing from south to north and should be completed to Napier Avenue by 2003.

The current study is an update to the 1981 FEIS for approximately four miles of the previously approved freeway alignment between Napier Avenue and I-94. Since the approval of the 1981 FEIS, the Blue Creek Fen, crossed by the originally approved alignment, has been identified as a unique resource. The fen provides habitat to many unique species including the Mitchell's satyr butterfly, identified as a Federal Endangered Species in 1991. To minimize impacts to this resource, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would require longer and more costly structures to span the Blue Creek Fen than originally anticipated. MDOT concluded that there is a potential for significant reductions in construction costs and environmental impacts if the final segment of the freeway is realigned to avoid the Blue Creek Fen.

As a result, MDOT initiated the current study which involved the preparation of a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement to examine the impacts of alternative alignments compared to the original alignment.

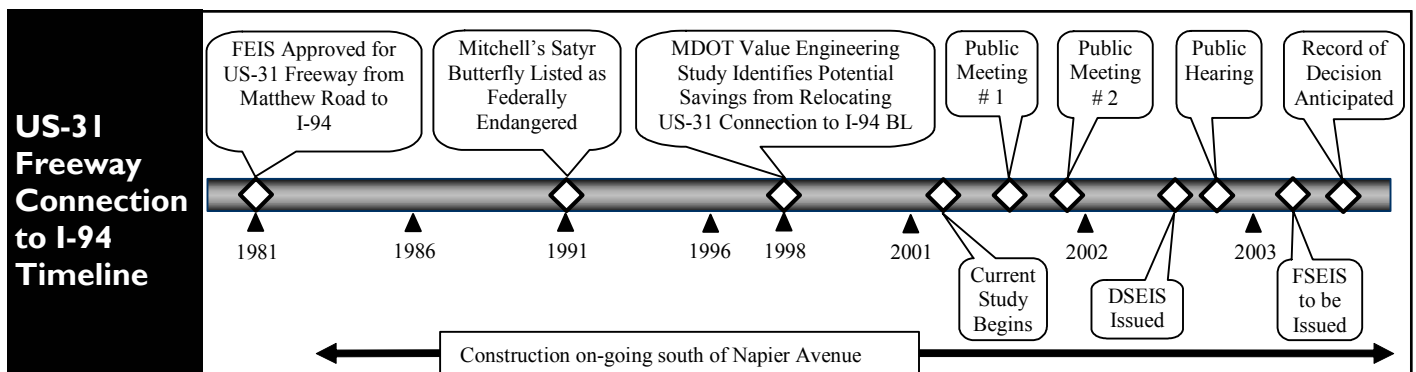
Since April 2001, the US-31 Study Team has identified

and mapped known constraints found within the study area and developed alternatives for evaluation. The initial Illustrative Alternatives were presented at a Public Information Meeting at the Mendel Center on July 18, 2001.

Following the first public information meeting, the Study Team conducted further evaluation of the alternatives. Based on comments from the public and resource agencies, and through further traffic, environmental and engineering analysis, the Illustrative Alternatives were refined into a set of Practical Alternatives. These Practical Alternatives were presented at a second public information meeting on November 6, 2001.

Following the second public information meeting, the Practical Alternatives were refined and further social, economic, environmental and engineering analyses were conducted. The Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (DSEIS) was then prepared to document the evaluation of the Practical Alternatives. This document is available for review at the public hearing.

Following the public hearing, the Study Team will address comments and issues identified by the public and resource agencies commenting on the DSEIS. A Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FSEIS) and Record of Decision (ROD) will then be prepared identifying a Recommended Alternative for construction.



Purpose of and Need for the Proposed Action

The primary purpose of the proposed project is to achieve US-31 freeway system connectivity between the existing US-31 freeway at the north and south termini of the study area and to achieve a US-31 freeway system linkage to I-94. This project seeks to provide a free flow freeway traffic movement through the completion of the limited access US-31 freeway from Napier Avenue to I-94 in Berrien County. An additional purpose of the project is to identify and recommend an alternative that achieves the primary purpose of this study while meeting the following criteria:

- minimize impacts to the surrounding environment;
- reduce construction costs from those estimated for the FEIS alignment;
- improve the efficiency of north-south vehicular travel and the movement of goods and services throughout the entire US-31 corridor;
- improve local access within Berrien County by providing greater accessibility between the rural southern and more urbanized northern portions of the County; and
- provide transportation improvements that are supportive of other economic development efforts within the Benton Harbor area.

This project seeks to provide a free flow freeway traffic movement through the completion of the limited access US-31 freeway from Napier Avenue to I-94.



US-31 Freeway construction at Napier Avenue looking north toward the current study area.

The need for completing the US-31 freeway to I-94 is supported by several factors including:

- system connectivity and linkage;
- relief of traffic congestion on Napier Avenue that would exist under No-Build conditions;
- the inadequacy of local roads to provide adequate capacity and a free flow movement for traffic wishing to access I-94, I-196/US-31 North, and Business Loop 94 (BL-94) from the existing US-31 freeway;
- the need for improved access to I-94 and BL-94 to assist economic development initiatives in the economically depressed Benton Harbor area; and
- the inability of alternative modes of transportation to meet through traffic and commercial travel demands.

Alternatives Considered

Four Practical Alternatives are being considered along with a No-Build Alternative within the DSEIS. **Figure 1** on the colored **Figures Insert** illustrates the Practical Alternatives.

Through a comparison of the costs, engineering issues, social, economic, and environmental impacts, traffic operations, and public and agency comments, the Study Team has identified PA-2 as the Preferred Alternative at this time. However, a final recommendation will not take place until following review of public and agency comments on the public hearing and DSEIS.

No-Build Alternative

The No-Build Alternative would have the US-31 freeway end at Napier Avenue. Traffic would use Napier Avenue to connect to I-94 and would use I-94 to reach I-196/US-31 North. This alternative would result in no additional US-31 construction or right-of-way costs. Traffic projections indicate that the No-Build Alternative would result in a reduced level-of-service and heavy congestion on some segments of Napier Avenue and some adjoining freeway ramps. MDOT plans to construct the missing eastbound I-94 to westbound BL-94 loop ramp at the existing BL-94 interchange as a part of all alternatives. As the No-Build Alternative does not provide a free flow traffic movement for vehicles using US-31, and does not provide a US-31 freeway-to-freeway connection, it does not meet the primary purpose of and need for the project.

Practical Alternative One (PA-1)

PA-1 involves low cost Transportation System Management (TSM) improvements. Like the No-Build Alternative, the US-31 freeway would end at Napier Avenue and traffic would use the existing five-lane Napier Avenue roadway to access I-94. PA-1 would

involve minor upgrades to and around the Napier Avenue interchanges, including improvements to the existing eastbound I-94 and southbound I-196 on ramps, and dedicated right-turn lanes on Napier Avenue at the US-31 and I-94 interchanges. The missing eastbound I-94 to westbound BL-94 movement would also be constructed at the existing I-94/BL-94 interchange. PA-1 is projected to result in significant traffic congestion on Napier Avenue by 2025, including traffic backups and delay at the I-94/Napier Avenue interchange. As PA-1 does not achieve free flow freeway system connectivity and a freeway linkage to I-94 for US-31 traffic, it does not meet the primary purpose of and need for the project. PA-1 improvements are forecast to cost less than \$5 million.

Practical Alternative Two (PA-2)

PA-2 would provide a US-31 freeway connection to I-94 just south of the existing I-94/BL-94 interchange. The BL-94 interchange would be relocated to the south as a full access interchange to include all movements. Traffic on the US-31 freeway would also have a direct connection to BL-94 as well as I-94. PA-2 would reduce the congestion problems forecast with a No-Build Alternative and would achieve free flow system connectivity between US-31, I-94, and I-196/US-31 to the north. PA-2 includes auxiliary lanes on I-94 between the proposed US-31 interchange with I-94/BL-94 and the existing I-94/I-196/US-31 interchange. These lanes allow through traffic on US-31 to remain in the auxiliary lane provided and not merge onto I-94. **Figure 2** on the colored **Figures Insert** illustrates the proposed auxiliary lanes. As a result, safety and level-of-service along I-94 will not be compromised. PA-2 is forecast to have a 2005 construction cost of \$79.2 million. PA-2 has been identified as the Preferred Alternative.

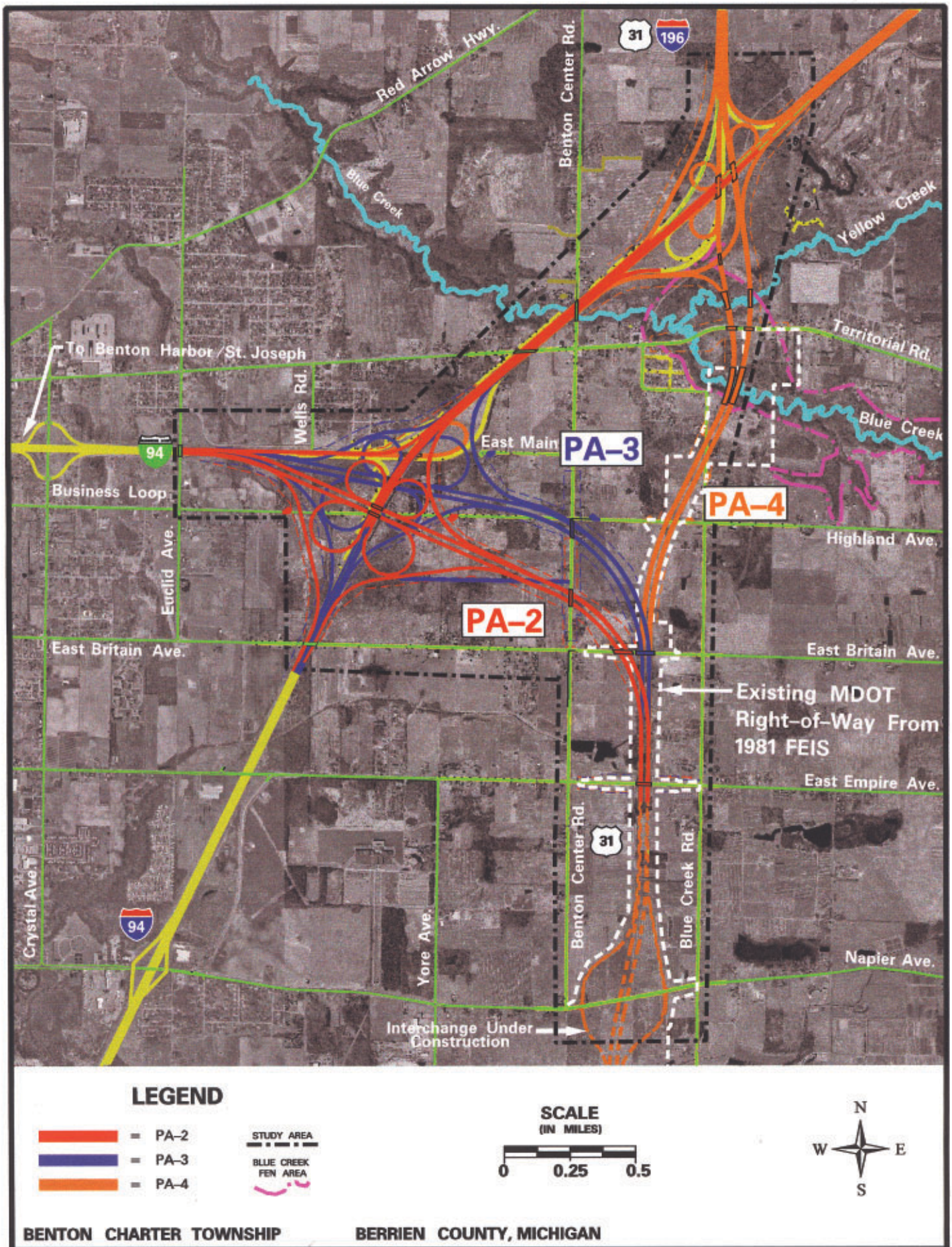
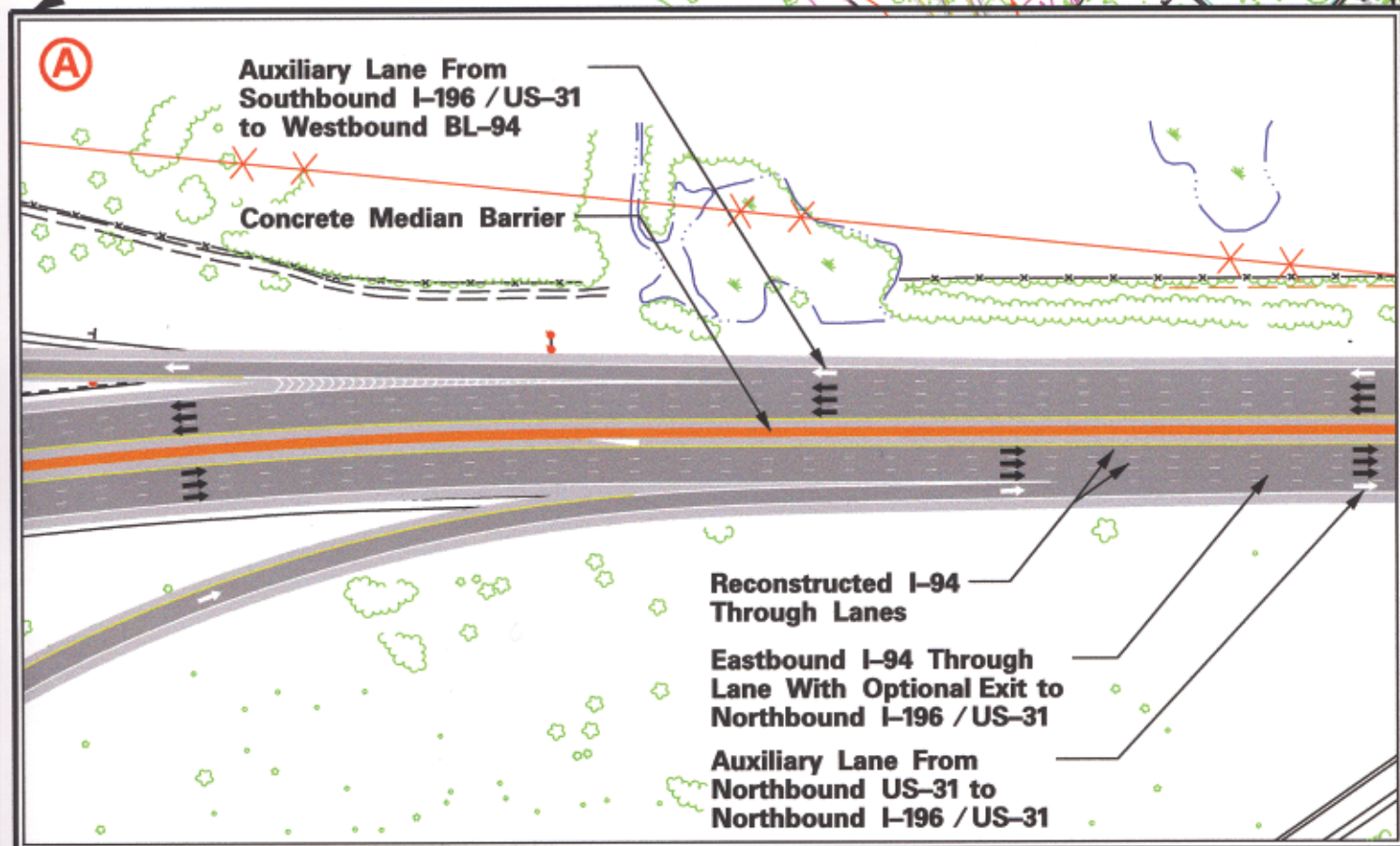
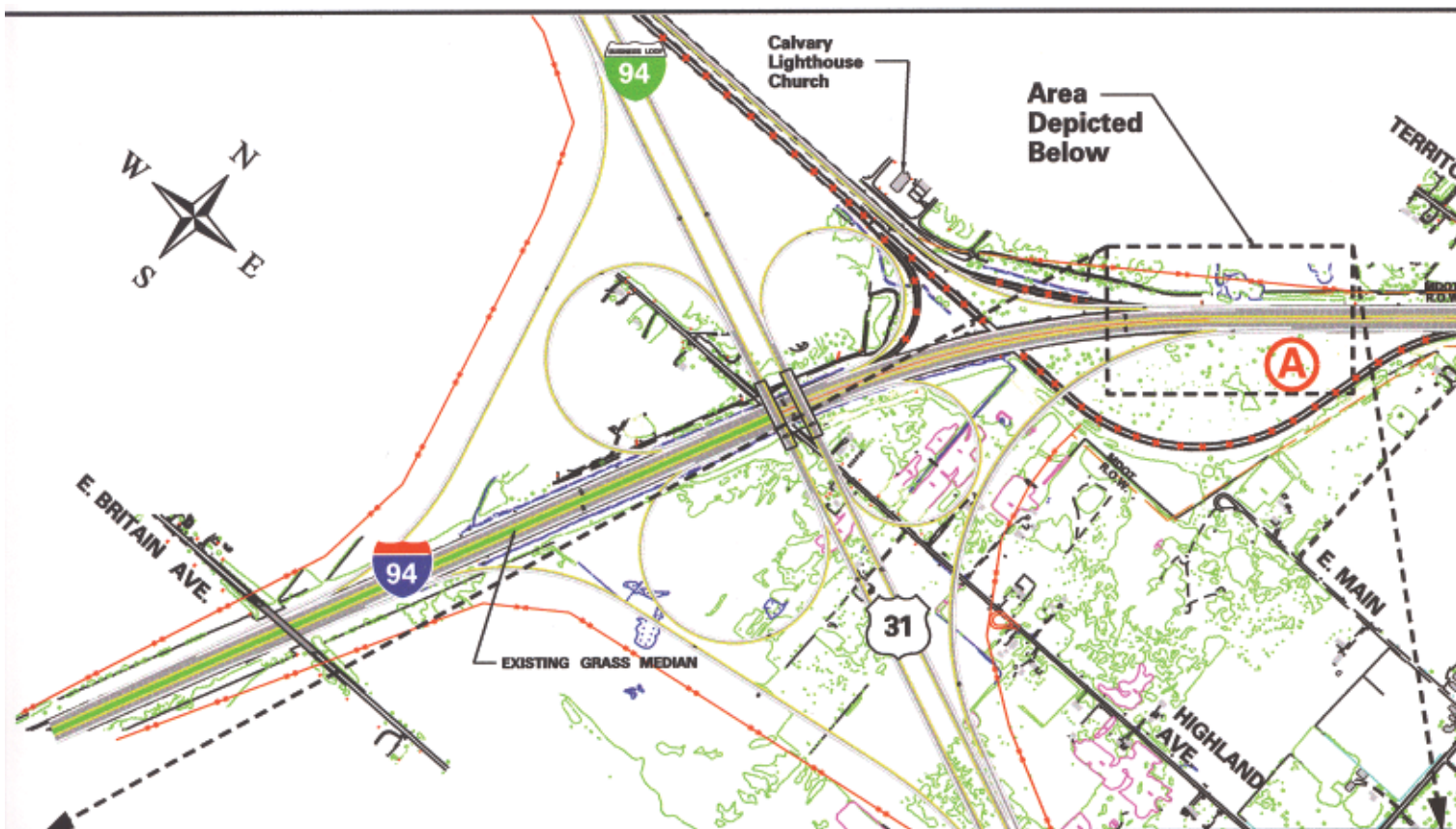
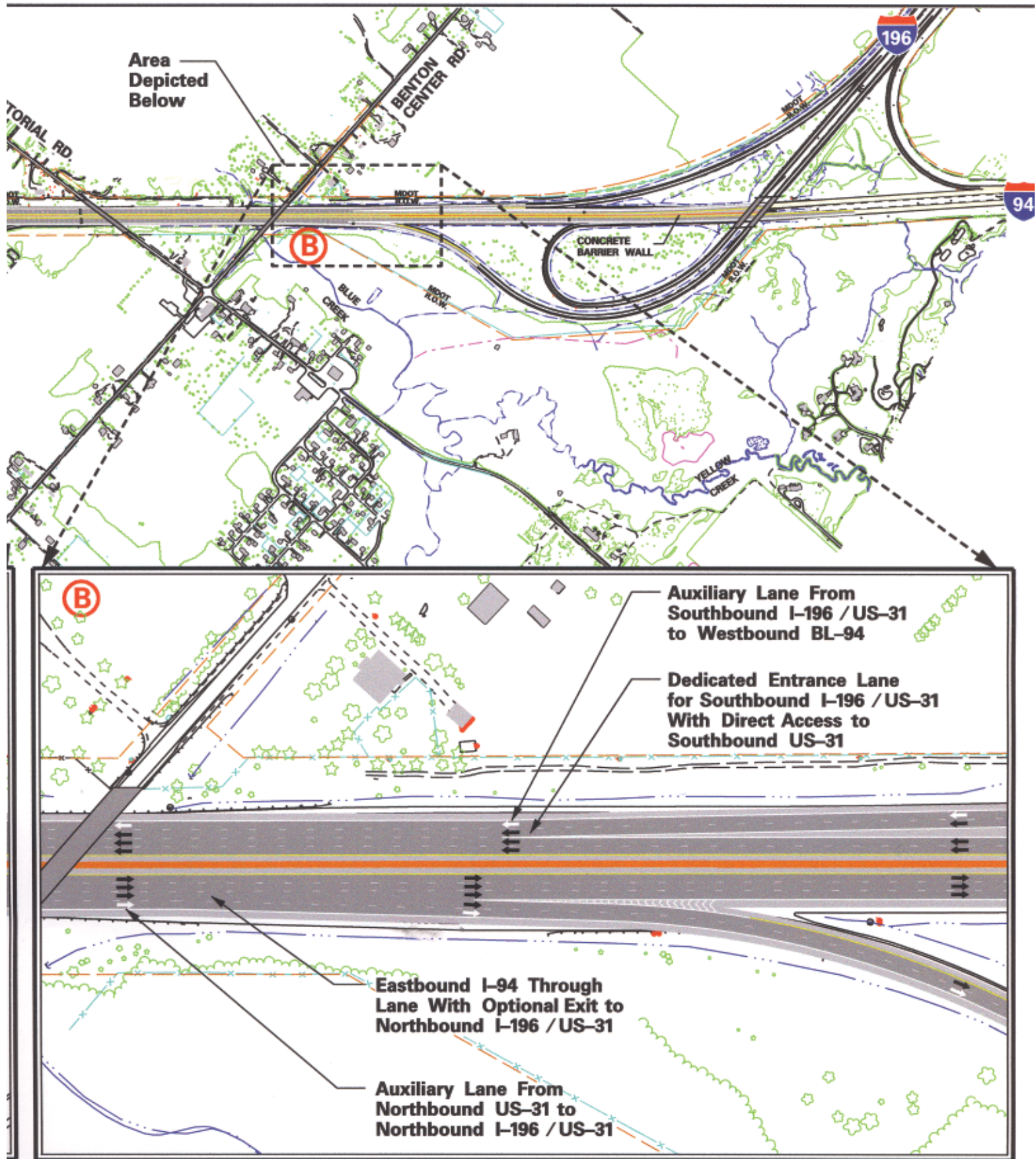


Figure 1 Practical Freeway Alternatives



➡ = Dedicated Entrance / Exit Lane Between Interchanges

Auxiliary Lanes 1



for PA-2 and PA-3

Figure 2 Auxiliary Lanes on I-9

PA-2 Designated as the Preferred Alternative

As a result of detailed engineering, traffic, social, economic, and environmental analysis along with initial public and agency comment, PA-2 (shown in red in **Figure 1**) has been designated as the Preferred Alternative in the DSEIS. **However, a final recommendation will not be made until after the Public Hearing has concluded and comments from the public and resource agencies have been considered.**

PA-2 best meets the purpose of and need for the project when compared to all of the Practical Alternatives. The following points highlight the main reasons for the designation of PA-2 as the Preferred Alternative for the US-31 Freeway Connection to I-94.

- PA-2 provides a free flow US-31 freeway link to I-94 and allows for a connection between the US-31 freeway south of Napier Avenue to the I-196/US-31 freeway to the north.
- PA-2 substantially reduces environmental impacts compared to those of the 1981 FEIS alignment.
- PA-2 substantially reduces the cost of the freeway connection compared to the 1981 FEIS alignment and is the least expensive of the freeway Build Alternatives.
- PA-2 requires one local road closure, Highland Avenue at I-94, while PA-3 requires both the closure of Highland Avenue and the elimination of the Highland Avenue/Benton Center Road intersection. PA-4 requires the closure of Highland Avenue and Blue Creek Road.

- Of the two Practical Alternatives that tie into Business Loop 94 (PA-2 and PA-3), PA-2 provides for the better traffic operations as it allows for the greatest separation between the I-94/BL-94 and I-94/I-196/US-31 interchanges on I-94.
- Level-of-service and safety on I-94 will not be compromised with PA-2 as auxiliary lanes (**Figure 2**) will ensure a smooth transition between US-31, I-94, and I-196 with no lane changes required for traffic wishing to follow US-31 north or south.



PA-2 will not compromise level-of-service or safety on I-94

- PA-2 requires fewer residential relocations than does PA-3 and it does not disproportionately impact any Environmental Justice (low income or minority) communities.
- PA-2 does not impact any properties recommended for further investigation for eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places.
- PA-2 construction staging will be the most efficient of all freeway Build Alternatives resulting in the least disruption of traffic during construction.



Alternatives Considered (continued)

Practical Alternative Three (PA-3)

PA-3 would result in a US-31 freeway connection to I-94 at the existing I-94/BL-94 interchange. PA-3 is similar to PA-2 but is located slightly further north. PA-3 would also involve the reconstruction of the I-94/BL-94 interchange to include the missing eastbound I-94 to westbound BL-94 movement. Like PA-2, PA-3 also achieves free flow system connectivity between US-31, I-94, and I-196/US-31 North. PA-3 would also feature auxiliary lanes on I-94 between the proposed US-31 interchange with I-94/BL-94 and the existing I-94/I-196/US-31 interchange. PA-3 is also more costly than PA-2. In addition, the closer proximity of the PA-3 interchange with I-94 to the existing I-94/I-196/US-31 interchange makes the traffic operations less desirable than those for PA-2. PA-3 is forecast to have a 2005 construction cost of \$82.4 million.

Practical Alternative Four (PA-4)

PA-4 is the 1981 FEIS approved alignment with minor modifications. PA-4 would connect the US-31 freeway to I-94 at I-196/US-31 North. The missing eastbound I-94 to westbound BL-94 movement would also be constructed at the I-94/BL-94 interchange. PA-4 achieves free flow system connectivity between the existing US-31 freeway segments north and south of the study area and a freeway linkage to I-94 and I-196/US-31 North. PA-4 would cross Blue Creek, Yellow Creek, and the environmentally sensitive Blue Creek Fen on two structures (northbound and southbound). Each structure would be comprised of two 175-foot approach structures and a 350-foot clear center span to avoid disturbance of the fen. PA-4 would also involve the addition of auxiliary lanes between the existing I-94/BL-94 interchange and the reconstructed I-94/I-196/US-31 interchange in place of the previously proposed collector/distributor roads on I-94. PA-4 is forecast to have a 2005 construction cost of \$110 million.

Engineering and Traffic Issues

For the No-Build Alternative, there are five locations that are expected to operate at level-of-service (LOS) E or F during the afternoon peak period in design year 2025. LOS is a measure of roadway congestion from A to F in which A represents free flow traffic and F represents heavy congestion. Traffic simulation showed that eastbound Napier Avenue to southbound US-31 traffic will experience delay. Traffic could be backed up as far as Yore Avenue on eastbound Napier Avenue in the p.m. peak hour. The traffic analysis exhibit presented at the public hearing illustrates these traffic concerns.

The traffic analysis demonstrated acceptable traffic operations and LOS for all Build Alternatives. PA-2,

PA-3, and PA-4 operate at a LOS D or better for the projected 2025 traffic volumes and at LOS C or better on mainline US-31 and mainline I-94 between the BL-94 and I-196 interchanges. LOS D is the desired minimum LOS for new construction. Commercial vehicles account for up to 30% of daily traffic volumes. An analysis of the crash history along I-94 through the study area did not find crash patterns that would indicate geometric deficiencies; many of these crashes involved animals or occurred during inclement weather.

Both the traffic analysis exhibit and a 3-D computer simulation, also presented at the public hearing, show that with the Preferred Alternative (PA-2), US-31, I-94, I-196 and Napier Avenue will operate efficiently.

Social, Economic, and Environmental Considerations

The following is a summary of the potential impacts evaluated for each of the Build Alternatives in relation to the No-Build Alternative. A table summarizing the potential impacts for the Practical Build Alternatives is located on **Page 8**.

Relocations

The No-Build Alternative and PA-1 would have no relocations. Preferred Alternative PA-2 would require 14 residential relocations while PA-3 would require 26. PA-4 would require one relocation in addition to those already acquired as a result of the 1981 FEIS. No commercial relocations are required for any alternative. PA-3 would require the relocation of one church. No community facilities are relocated for the other alternatives.

Farmland

The No-Build Alternative and PA-1 have no farmland impacts. The number of farmland parcels impacted by the freeway Build Alternatives ranges from 16 for PA-4 to 54 for PA-3. PA-2 impacts 46 farm parcels.

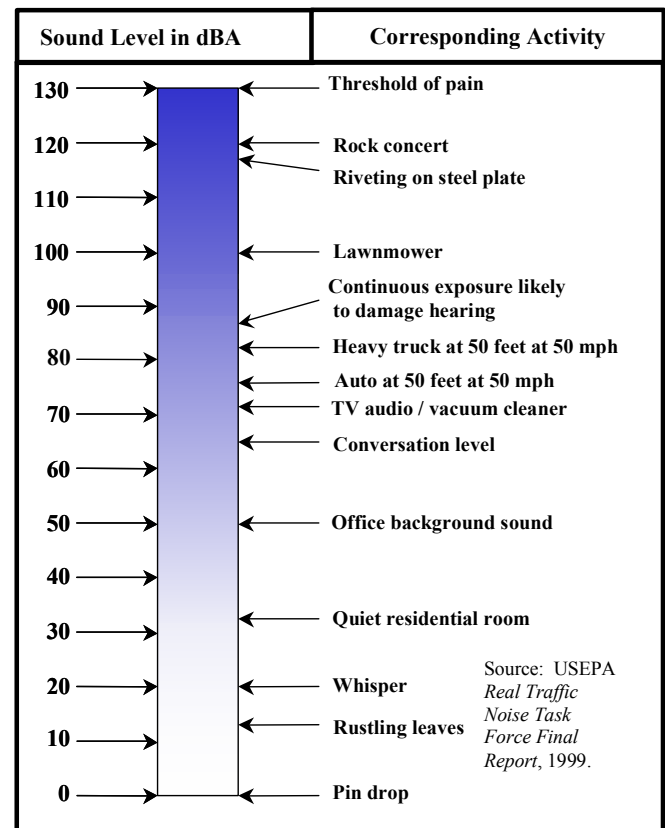
Environmental Justice

The only identified potential for disproportionately high and adverse impacts on low-income populations are associated with the proposed westbound I-94 exit ramp to BL-94 on PA-3. No disproportionately high or adverse impacts on minority populations were identified. PA-3 would require the relocation of nine residences and the Calvarys Lighthouse Church in the Butler East Euclid subdivision. PA-2 also connects to BL-94 but does not impact the subdivision and shifts the exit ramp farther from the residents.

Noise

Local residences and other noise sensitive receptors (churches, schools, etc.) were monitored and the potential noise impacts of the alternatives modeled. Forecast No-Build and PA-1 noise levels within the study area range from 48 to 75 decibels. Nineteen noise sensitive receptors would be exposed to noise

levels ranging from 66 to 75 decibels, exceeding the FHWA Noise Abatement Criterion of 66 decibels. PA-2 is forecast to have noise impacts to 24 noise sensitive receptors and PA-3 is forecast to impact 17. PA-4 is forecast to have noise impacts to 33 receptors. Noise impacts are defined, following FHWA Guidelines and MDOT criteria, as a property at or exceeding 66 decibels (dBA - A scale) for exterior noise or having an increase in noise level of ten or more decibels over existing noise levels.



Water Quality and Aquatic Communities

The No-Build Alternative would result in minimal water quality impacts. Increased run-off resulting from improvements to the I-94 crossing of Blue Creek will have to be addressed for PA-2, PA-3, and PA-4. Site specific drainage plans along with a variety of mitigation actions will reduce the potential for the transfer of pollutants and sediments into streams and drains. PA-4 has the greatest potential for water quality impacts

Social, Economic, and Environmental Considerations (continued)

due to new crossings of the Blue and Yellow Creeks and the Blue Creek Fen, and the need for extension of the existing Blue Creek box culvert under I-94 to allow for the addition of auxiliary lanes. PA-4 must be widened to the outside to avoid the costly reconstruction of the I-94/BL-94 interchange. Interchange configurations for PA-2 and PA-3 permit widening of I-94 into the existing median and avoid the need for extension of the Blue Creek culvert.

Wetlands

The No-Build and PA-1 alternatives would have no direct impacts to wetland habitats. PA-2 would impact 18 wetland complexes with 13.2 acres of impact; PA-3 would impact 21 wetland complexes with a total impact of 10.8 acres, while PA-4 would impact 33 complexes and 29.9 acres.

Threatened and Endangered Species

The No-Build and PA-1 alternatives would pose no threat to any state or federally listed threatened, endangered, special concern, or candidate species. The eastern box turtle, a state species of special concern, was observed in wetland complexes in the northern part of the study area but would not be directly impacted by PA-2 and PA-3. Each of these alternatives impacts one site with moderate potential habitat for the federally endangered Indiana bat. PA-4 has the most potential to impact threatened and endangered species. The federally endangered Mitchell's satyr butterfly, the eastern box turtle, and other listed species have all been observed within the sensitive habitat of the Blue Creek Fen in this or past studies. PA-4 also impacts one site with moderate potential habitat for the federally endangered Indiana bat.

Natural Areas

None of the proposed alternatives affect any existing or proposed public parks, recreation sites, wildlife refuges, or natural areas of special recreational significance. PA-4 impacts the Blue Creek Fen area, which contains unique, environmentally sensitive habitat.

Cultural Resources

The No-Build, PA-1, PA-2, and PA-3 alternatives would have no impact on cultural resources. PA-4 would potentially impact a single property (the House of David barn) that has been

recommended for further study to determine eligibility for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

Aesthetic and Visual Character

The No-Build Alternative and PA-1 would have little visual impact on the rural areas within the project corridor. During construction, any of the Build Alternatives will have short-term visual impacts due to the presence of large construction equipment. Each of the freeway Build Alternatives (PA-2, PA-3, PA-4) would impact the view for some rural residents through introducing the presence of a freeway.

Additional Impacts

The following social, economic, and environmental considerations were also evaluated for each of the Practical Alternatives, but impacts associated with these items are anticipated to be minor or non-existent: Wild and Scenic Rivers, Critical Dunes, Coastal Zones, Air Quality, Economics (tax revenue), Contaminated Sites, Geological Resources, and Secondary and Cumulative Development.



Blue Creek at Benton Center Road.

Summary of Potential Impacts

Contact Information

Please mail, fax or e-mail comments to:

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Michigan Department of Transportation
425 W. Ottawa St.
P.O. Box 30050
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E-mail:
parsonsb@michigan.gov

Project Toll Free Phone Number:

1-800-524-4244

Project Website:

www.mdot.state.mi.us/projects/us31toi94

Right-of-Way Acquisition Questions:

Michigan Department of Transportation
Real Estate Division
1501 Kilgore Road
Kalamazoo, MI 49001

Phone: (616) 337-3900

Fax: (616) 337-3909

Potential Impacts Criterion	Alternative PA-1 Transportation System Management	Alternative PA-2 Connection of US-31 Freeway to I-94 South of BL-94	Alternative PA-3 Connection of US-31 Freeway to I-94 at BL-94	Alternative PA-4 FEIS connecting to I-94 at I-196/US-31
Total Right-of-Way Required (acres)	1	442	428	495 ^A
Neighborhoods/Subdivision Impacts (#)	None	None	1 ^B	None
Community Facilities (Churches, Schools etc.)	None	None	1 ^B	None
Residential Relocations (#)	0	14	26	1 ^C
Commercial Relocations (#)	0	0	0	0
Noise Sensitive Receptors Exposed to Levels Exceeding FHWA Criteria (#) ^D	19	24	17	33
Required Bridge Spans over Floodplains	None	None	None	4 new structures and 1 rebuilt structure
Agriculture and Open Space Impacts (acres)	0	441	416	491 ^A
Wetland Impacts (acres)	0	13.2	10.8	29.9
Observed Threatened and Endangered Species Impacts	None	None	None	Mitchell's satyr butterfly
Potentially Historic Buildings/Site Impacts (#)	0	0	0	1
Local Road Closures (#)	0	1	1	2
Grade Separations (#) ^E	1	5	5	11
Level-of-Service on I-94	C/D/E	B/C/D	B/C/D	B/C/D
Total Cost	\$5 million	\$79.2 million	\$82.4 million	\$110 million
Constructability Difficulty (H,M,L)	Low	Low	Low	High

^A Includes previously acquired right-of-way resulting from the 1981 FEIS

^B Nine homes in the Butler East Euclid Subdivision are relocated along with Calvarys Lighthouse Church

^C Relocations for PA-4 do not include 36 relocations for the 1981 FEIS which have already taken place

^D Defined as having design hour exterior noise levels between 66 and 75 dBA or a 10 dBA or more increase

^E Does not include replacement of existing grade separations on I-94

What's Next?

Following the compilation of the transcript for the public hearing and the receipt of comments from the public and resource agencies, the MDOT Study Team will begin preparation of the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FSEIS). Public and agency comments will guide the selection of a

Recommended Alternative and/or refinement of the Preferred Alternative (PA-2). The FSEIS will provide responses to the comments received. By the spring of 2003 the FSEIS will be released and a Record of Decision will be issued by the FHWA identifying the final Recommended Alternative for final design and construction.



This document has been published in keeping with the intent of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and subsequent implementing regulations and policies. The cost of publishing 500 copies of this document at approximately \$2.60 per copy is \$1,300, and the document has been printed in accordance with Michigan Executive Directive 1991-6.